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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 002920

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KMPI](#) [KMCA](#) [YM](#) [DOMESTIC POLITICS](#) [DEMOCRATIC REFORM](#)

SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT FLEXES MUSCLES, CHALLENGES ROYG ON CORRUPTION

REF: A. SANAA 1782

[B](#). SANAA 2766

Classified By: A/DCM Thomas Burke for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In its last session, Yemen's Parliament asserted its constitutional authority in unprecedented fashion, summoning ministers for questioning, challenging ROYG corruption, and even passing original legislation. Parliamentarians also took aim at the Speaker, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, accusing him of protecting corrupt ministers and furthering his own business interests at the expense of Parliament's independence. Opposition to ROYG policies transcended party affiliation and demonstrated the growing influence of reform-minded MPs, many of whom have received training and support from MEPI-funded programs. Parliament remains much weaker than the executive branch, but there are growing signs that the legislature is ready to play a more active role in Yemen's democracy. End summary.

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Parliament v. ROYG  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) On September 21, Parliament entered the Ramadan recess after one of the most active sessions of Yemen's legislature in the fifteen years since unification. For the first time, Parliament used its Constitutional authority to require government ministers to appear before the members for questioning. Parliament submitted 76 lists of questions to the ROYG, and set out a two-week schedule for ministers to appear and address the body. The issues addressed included the sale of liquid natural gas, implementation of the sales tax, and the shooting of demonstrators during July fuel riots. Perhaps most controversial is a supplementary budget currently before Parliament. (Septel)

[1](#)3. (C) According to Saadaldin Taleb of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the session culminated in a standoff with the executive branch, when Parliament demanded that Minister of Public Works Abdullah al-Dafa'i answer questions about his ministry's tendering practices. Dafa'i initially dispatched his deputy, who confessed to MPs that eighty percent of the ministry's contracts were awarded without tender. This clear violation of Yemeni law prompted Parliament to insist that Dafa'i himself appear. His refusal to do so led many MPs to call for a no-confidence vote in the Minister. (Note: Parliament has the constitutional power to vote a minister out of office, but has never exercised this right. End note.)

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Al-Ahmar: "Protector of Corruption"  
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[1](#)4. (C) In a twist demonstrating the oddity of Yemen's Parliament, members of the President's own GPC party were behind the push to remove Dafa'i. The GPC holds nearly eighty percent of the seats in Parliament, but a growing caucus within the party is willing to criticize the Government for what it perceives to be rampant corruption and mismanagement. Standing in their way was Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, leader of the minority opposition Islah party but appointed by President Saleh to be Speaker of Parliament. The four-person Presidium committee, headed by the Speaker and charged with determining the Parliamentary agenda, is responsible for delivering inquiries to ROYG ministers and demanding their appearance before Parliament. Al-Ahmar has repeatedly refused to carry out his duty, said Taleb, viewing his personal relationship with the President as more important than his position in Parliament.

[1](#)5. (C) In the case of Dafa'i, Taleb expained that al-Ahmar was even more reticent to summon the Minister for questions, as his own road-building company was the beneficiary of many illegal contracts with the Ministry of Public Works. Parliamentarians sought to retaliate against al-Ahmar by threatening a vote of no-confidence in Prime Minister Bajammal, which constitutionally would have brought down the Government. The MPs had enough signatures to call a vote (76), but the motion was blocked by the Presidium.

[1](#)6. (C) Sheikh Abdullah's defense of the ROYG prompted angry

responses from other MPs. Al-Ahmar was accused by fellow Parliamentarians of being a "protector of corruption." Even al-Ahmar's son Hamid, an Islahi MP and head of the al-Ahmar business group, gave a speech saying it was time for his father to step down. Hamid told Econoff that he believed his father's relationship with the President was compromising the integrity of Parliament. Faisal abu-Rhas, a prominent MP from al-Jawf, offered his resignation to Parliament in protest saying, "Sheikh Abdullah has clearly revealed his true face as an obstructionist." According to Taleb, some MPs who had never before spoken on the floor of Parliament made statements in support of abu-Rhas and against ROYG corruption. Many of them focused on al-Ahmar as the heart of the problem. (Note: Parliament has delayed a vote on whether to accept abu-Rhas's resignation until after the Ramadan recess. End note.)

17. (C) Just as al-Ahmar has been protecting the Government, President Saleh was protecting the Speaker's position. (Ref A) Parliament submitted to the President a draft of its own by-law, addressing such issues as pensions for MPs and issuance of paychecks (MPs are currently paid in cash). The by-law also includes a provision for electing the Presidium every two years, with mandatory elections immediately following passage of the law. Al-Ahmar has been pushing for at least a three-year term, saying anything less is undignified. Despite overwhelming GPC support, Saleh vetoed his party's bill out of loyalty to his long-time ally and friend, Sheikh Abdullah. Parliamentarians appear to have the support necessary to override the President's veto, which has never occurred in the history of the institution. They will address the matter further upon returning from recess.

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MEPI Strengthens Democratic Institutions  
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18. (C) Ali al-Imrani, Head of the Finance Committee, explained that Parliament's new-found backbone came not out of loyalty to party or ideology, but to the independence of the institution itself. Much of this new-found pride, said Taleb, can be attributed to the success of NDI's MEPI-funded program for strengthening Parliamentary institutions. Using NDI's legislative resource center, MPs meet regularly to analyze and discuss strategy on pending issues. The program has succeeded in building a core group of reform-minded MPs from across the political spectrum who are willing to exercise their constitutional rights as legislators. In June, for example, Parliament approved a law against smoking in public buildings that was signed into law by the President. The vote was notable as it was the first time in Parliament's history that it drafted a law from scratch and had it approved by the President.

19. (C) Abdul Rahman Bafadel, leader of the opposition Islah caucus in Parliament, expressed a broader vision for Yemen as a true parliamentary democracy in which the President is limited to a ceremonial role. Islah spokesman Mohamad Qahtan has made similar press statements in recent days, indicating increased confidence in the role of Parliament. Bafadel was resigned to the fact that President Saleh would likely win another seven-year term in the 2006 elections, but believed that by 2013 Yemen would be ready to move away from "the power of one individual" in democracy. Imrani agreed with these sentiments, and expressed his desire to shape the GPC party so that it is independent of the President's control.

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Window Dressing No Longer?  
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10. (C) Comment: Parliament's growing willingness to challenge ROYG policy, especially on issues of corruption, is a promising sign for Yemen's nascent democracy. Recent developments come as something of a surprise considering the GPC's control over Parliament, and demonstrate an increased sense of institutional integrity among MPs. Parliamentarians are taking their oversight role more seriously, and have even begun exercising legislative authority. They are also openly frustrated with what they view as undemocratic political and business alliances of ruling elites -- most notably between President Saleh and Sheikh al-Ahmar. (Ref B) Conflicts of interest pervade Parliament as well, and many MPs are not pure democrats. When push comes to shove, Parliament will usually buckle under pressure from the ROYG, and even many GPC parliamentarians believe that a stronger opposition is needed to make Parliament more effective. Nevertheless, Parliament has a critical role in controlling corruption and helping democracy take root -- a role it is increasingly willing to fulfill. End comment.  
Krajeski